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Assessing the Level of Reflective Thinking in ELT Students

Bakhtiar Naghdipour [a]*, Okechukwu Lawrence Emeagwali [b]

[a]*ELT Department, Faculty of Education, Eastern Mediterranean University, Famagusta, North Cyprus*
[b]*The Foundation English School, The American University, Kyrenia, North Cyprus*

Abstract

This study attempts to assess and compare the level of reflective thinking in undergraduate university students and to investigate lecturers' perceptions on the promoters or inhibitors to their students' reflective thinking. A sample of 96 students who were taking practical courses such as 'Special Teaching Methods', 'Teaching Language Skills' and 'Teaching Practice' as well as 10 instructors of the ELT department at Eastern Mediterranean University participated in this study. The results revealed that age and the level of education are two key determinants of reflective thinking behaviour. The lecturers also reported several constraints and promoters to reflective thinking.

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1. Introduction

Grooming students and teachers to become reflective thinkers by enhancing their knowledge about useful strategies with which they can reflect on their learning and practice respectively is one of today's fundamental challenges in education. Reflective thinking or ability to involve cognitive faculties in resolving complicated learning situations could be regarded as one of the essential elements of the learning process (Boyd & Fales, 1983; Davis, 1998; Dewey, 1933; Moon, 1999; Schön, 1991). Reflecting on practice has become an element of professional competence required to bridge the theoretical and practical gap in any profession (Mann, et. al, 2009). This is even more important in the teaching profession as both teachers and learners need to review and reflect on their routines regularly. Thus, if it is feasible to assess students' level of reflective thinking, it might be possible to seek ways to come up with strategies to help them become better reflective thinkers. However, unlike some developments in the measurement of critical thinking skills and dispositions such as 'The California Critical Thinking Disposition Inventory' (CCTDI), which was used extensively in health sciences and practices (Begbie, 2007), instruments for assessing reflective thinking are still scarce. The first studies on the measurement of this complex construct used reflective journals, interview and classroom observation, hence were qualitative in nature

* Corresponding Author: Bakhtiar Naghdipour . Tel.: +90-533-887-1218
E-mail address: bakhtiar.naghdipour@cc.emu.edu.tr

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(Kember et al., 2000). This might be due to the fact that there is also no agreed upon single definition of reflection itself among researchers (Rodgeres, 2002), or because of the existence of different variables which might directly or indirectly affect the ability to think reflectively. Therefore, this study aims to first examine the level of students' reflective thinking and then look for supporting evidence from their lecturers as to inhibitors and promoters of reflective thinking practice in order to provide further insight for teachers, syllabus designers and material developers with respect to rethinking the incorporation of tasks and elements into their instructional materials and lesson plans that might improve students' reflective thinking behaviour.

2. The study

Drawing on Mezirow's (1981) four stages of reflective thinking, this study is guided by the following questions:
1) Does the level of reflective thinking differ with respect to students' level of education?
2) What are instructors' perceptions of the inhibitors or promoters to the students' reflective thinking?

2.1 Participants

We carried out this study in the ELT Department of Eastern Mediterranean University where students prepare to become teachers of English language. All 96 participants (32 second-year, 32 third-year, and 32 fourth-year students) spoke Turkish as their first language, and they were studying English as a foreign language. Also, 10 lecturers of that department, who shared the students' first language and culture and were involved in teaching different courses to these students, participated in this study.

2.2 Data Collection Instruments and Procedure

'The Reflective Thinking Questionnaire' (RTQ), which was developed by Kember et al., (2000) and contained 16 statements was used to assess the level of reflective thinking in students. In addition, 'The Lecturers' Perceptions of Inhibitors to Reflective Thinking Questionnaire' (IPIRTQ), which was adapted from Oxman and Barell (1983) and consisted of 22 items. In the IPIRTQ, items 1-14 addressed the lecturers' perceptions of inhibitors to reflective thinking attributed to the students and items 15-22 targeted their perceptions on inhibitors attributed to the lecturers themselves, the department's policy as well as its academic atmosphere – was employed to investigate the faculty's perceptions concerning the inhibitors or promoters to the students' reflective thinking. The RTQ was translated into Turkish to make sure students understood each item on the survey; then it was administered and collected during the same session. The IPIRTQ, however, was emailed to the department's lecturers and they sent them back after completion.

3. Results

Table 1 shows the results of students' opinions on the 'Habitual Action' category or the items addressing their habits of repetition, relying only on handout materials for examinations and their dependency on what the lecturers say as the only source of learning. The results indicate that second-year students agreed with the four items within the category. In contrast, third- and fourth-year students, except for third-year students' opinions on item 5, disagreed with these four items but the level of disagreement was stronger among fourth-year students.

Table 1. Students' responses to items in habitual action category

Group		Item_1	Item_5	Item_9	Item_13
Second-year	Mean	3.41	3.44	3.22	3.41
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	1.241	.878	.792	1.214
Third-year	Mean	2.72	3.16	2.62	2.66

	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	.772	.884	1.070	.902
Fourth-year	Mean	2.28	2.87	2.62	2.38
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	1.114	1.129	1.008	1.238

In addition, the results of students' opinions on the items in the 'Understanding' category or the items addressing their understanding of concepts, content, lecturers' materials as well as continuous thinking of the materials taught indicate that, except for item 14 which elicited almost a neutral response from fourth-year students, an overwhelming majority of the three groups agreed with all items. However, second-year students agreed with these items more strongly than third- and much more than fourth-year students (see Table 2).

Table 2. Students' responses to items in understanding category

Group		Item 2	Item 6	Item 10	Item 14
Second-year	Mean	4.09	4.38	4.00	3.91
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	.734	.660	.842	.818
Third-year	Mean	3.56	3.97	3.88	3.31
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	.840	.695	.793	1.091
Fourth-year	Mean	3.59	3.19	3.44	2.50
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	.979	1.512	1.134	1.545

Furthermore, Table 3 depicts the results of items concerning students' questioning the way others do things, thinking of alternative ways of doing them, reflecting on actions and re-appraising experience ('Reflection' category). The results show that students in three groups agreed with items in this category, though the degree of their agreement varied, with fourth-year students agreeing more strongly with these items than the other two groups.

Table 3. Students' responses to items on reflection

Group		Item 3	Item 7	Item 11	Item 15
Second-year	Mean	3.50	3.50	3.28	3.34
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	1.295	1.295	1.224	1.234
Third-year	Mean	3.75	3.75	3.75	3.66
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	1.047	1.016	1.016	1.035
Fourth-year	Mean	4.19	4.41	4.19	4.31
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	.738	.499	.780	.780

Concerning the items on 'Critical Reflection' category, or those items that deal with changing students' outlook, challenging their firmly held ideas, changing their routines as well as finding faults with their beliefs, the results show that fourth-year students supported all of these items more strongly than the other two groups and this gap was also more obvious for the last items (12 - 16) in this category which could be the most representative items on assessing reflective thinking (see Table 4).

Table 4. Students' responses to items on critical reflection

Group		Item 4	Item 8	Item 12	Item16
Second-year	Mean	3.00	2.94	2.94	2.87
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	1.078	1.105	1.162	1.157
Third-year	Mean	3.31	3.22	3.22	3.16
	N	32	32	32	32

	Std. Deviation	1.203	.870	1.008	1.051
Fourth-year	Mean	3.81	3.81	3.94	4.00
	N	32	32	32	32
	Std. Deviation	1.230	1.120	1.105	1.016

The results on the first part of the IPIRTQ show that an overwhelming majority of lecturers reported that students suffer from the fear of being mocked in the classroom, which could be counted as the first inhibitor to reflective thinking. Additionally, a majority were of the opinion that students are afraid of being incorrect, see the teacher as the authority and expect a right answer for each question. Half of them also reported that students' lack of sufficient background knowledge, absenteeism and sticking with textbooks were among other inhibitors to reflective thinking. However, while they agreed that students lack experience with reflective thinking, lecturers believed that students do not lack the power of imagination. Moreover, while a majority reported that students were enthusiastic about learning new materials, they remained undecided about students' readiness for reflective thinking, their fear of teachers' put-downs and their habit of plagiarism.

As to the results of lecturers' responses to the second part of the IPIRTQ, they reported unsatisfactory communication among colleagues and believed that the departmental atmosphere is not conducive for reflective thinking practices. However, they disagreed that they prefer to ask questions that have 'right' answers. They also reported that they have time for class discussions and keep to their teaching routines, which could be considered as other promoters to reflective thinking in students. Furthermore, they agreed with the fact that they needed to assume responsibility towards covering content on curriculum, participating in decision-making policies regarding curriculum as well as feeling responsible for promoting reflective thinking in students.

4. Discussion and conclusions

The findings from different categories on the students' survey revealed that the higher the level of students' education, the better reflective thinkers they could be. For example, fourth-year students accorded less importance to the habits of memorization, rote learning and relying only on the content of provided materials than the other two groups, while they were more reflective and critical of their own learning, practices, ideas and beleifs as far as the practcial courses in this study were concerned. On the other hand, lecturers reported issues like students' shyness or fear of embarrassment, being afraid of making mistakes in front of others, viewing their teacher as the authority and expecting the right answer for any question as inhibitors to reflective thinking attributed to the students themselves. In addition, they perceived students' insufficient background knowledge, their absenteeism and dependency on textbooks as other issues hindering students from being reflective thinkers. However, they noted that the departmental atmosphere is not suitable for reflective thinking practices because of the unsatisfactory communication process which is one of the basic tenants of professionalism. This, therefore, highlights the importance of creating a proper learning environment (Song, et al., 2005) for teachers themselves first so that they can enhance their engagement in reflecting on their practice and self-evaluation as a means of professional development (Richards & Lockhart, 1994). As far as the promoters to reflective thinking were concerned, however, students' power of imagination and their enthusiasm for learning new materials were among the most crucial qualities. In addition, welcoming variety in answers to questions, holding class discussions, participating in decision-making policies regarding curriculum and assuming responsibility for promoting reflective thinking in students were among the other outstanding attributes on lecturers' part as to promoting reflective thinking in students.

These findings could imply that in spite of the fact that there are some variables that might hinder the process of students' reflection on their practice, some steps such as designing activities with more wait-time in a caring, understanding, collaborative and creative problem-solving atmosphere could affect their academic achievement and change their attitudes towards, for example, a special course at school (Tok, 2008). Furthermore, teachers should not only be engaged in decision-making policies through constructive communication and dialogue, they should also be

viewed as reflective thinkers themselves capable of change and reform in the educational context not as consumers of the curriculum (Zeichner & Liston, 1996). This, however, requires teachers to familiarize themselves with reflective practices by having reflective dialogues with their colleagues before introducing it to their students (Brockbank & McGill, 1998).

Thus, the process of reflection is a multi-dimensional phenomenon whose success or failure might be under the influence of various factors (Mann, et al., 2009). Also, while it was observed that professionals engage in reflective thinking, albeit in different ways and to different degrees, the push for teachers' engagement in reflective thinking activities and tasks will certainly equip them as problem solving professionals who can groom learners who will be reflective thinkers as well. However, the role of the environment in which teaching and learning happens should be emphasized once more because if this practice is not valued or encouraged, it might gradually lose its footing (Mann, et al., 2009). This is an inevitable priority for any educational institution due to the interdisciplinary nature and complexity of education in the new millennium.

Although further research with more qualitative methods such as the use of critical incidents, discussion, and debates in an academic context (İrez & Çakir, 2006; Kember, 2001) can offer a better understanding of the reflective practices in students as well as their instructors, the effects of some contextual or cultural factors should not be neglected. For example, in some societies challenging what the teachers say or letting them down might be interpreted as impolite. Therefore, it is expected that while doing research on the assessment of reflective thinking, social and cultural factors should be taken into account in order to shed more insight on this complex ability in educational contexts.

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